

Legionellosis

Fact Sheet



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An Office of the
Department of Health and Human Services

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What is Legionnaires' disease?

Legionnaires' disease is a pneumonia caused by *Legionella* bacteria. An outbreak of this disease among persons attending a convention of the American Legion in Philadelphia in 1976 led to its name. It is not a new disease; the earliest documented case was in 1947. Although cases occur all year long, both single cases and outbreaks occur more frequently in the summer and fall.

What are the symptoms of Legionnaires' disease?

Persons with Legionnaires' disease often have flu-like symptoms with muscle aches, headache, loss of appetite, and dry cough. Fevers are often between 102°-105°F and some people have stomach cramps and diarrhea. Chest X-ray usually shows pneumonia. Symptoms usually begin 2-10 days after a person is infected with the bacteria.

Another illness caused by *Legionella* bacteria is called Pontiac Fever. It consists of fever, headache, weakness and muscle ache, usually lasts for 2-5 days, and there is no pneumonia.

How is Legionnaires' disease spread?

A person can become ill with Legionnaires' disease by breathing in the *Legionella* bacteria, usually carried by mist. It is not spread from one person to another.

How is Legionnaires' disease diagnosed and treated?

Because Legionnaires' disease can cause symptoms similar to the "flu" and other kinds of pneumonia, it can take longer to diagnose. A number of different laboratory tests to identify *Legionella* can be done on blood, urine, respiratory secretions (sputum) and lung tissue. Your doctor can order these tests. Legionnaires' disease is usually treated with antibiotics.

Who gets Legionnaires' disease?

Anyone can get Legionnaires' disease, but it is more common among the elderly and those with impaired immune systems or underlying diseases.

Is Legionnaires' disease a serious illness?

It can be for people over 50 years of age or smokers, or those who have impaired immune systems due to underlying diseases (e.g., cancer, kidney failure, diabetes, HIV infection, chronic lung disease or heart failure) or medications (e.g., steroids, chemotherapy). Studies have shown that 5-30% of people diagnosed with Legionnaires' disease die.

Where are *Legionella* bacteria found?

The bacteria are found normally in many places in the environment. A common source is water. Outbreaks have been related to contaminated air-conditioning cooling towers, not window air conditioners. The bacteria also have been found in hot and cold-water taps, showers, whirlpool baths, creeks, ponds and wet soil.

Can Legionnaires' disease be prevented?

Measures can be taken to reduce the likelihood of exposure. For example, large air conditioning systems with cooling towers and evaporative condensers should be operated and maintained according to manufacturers' recommendations. Because *Legionella* bacteria are found throughout the environment, testing potential sources is not recommended when individual cases occur.

Legionnaires' disease in Maine

Maine has less than 15 cases of Legionnaires' disease reported per year. This includes cases acquired during travel outside of Maine. For Maine specific information please see <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/boh/newpubs.htm> and refer to the Infectious Disease Epidemiology Program Documents.

Where can I get more information?

For more information contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and

Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821 or at www.mainepublichealth.gov The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website <http://www.cdc.gov> – is another excellent source of health information.